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The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

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1 August 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Chairman, National Intelligence Council *SD*
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth
National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

SUBJECT: Soviet Strategy in the Southern Theater

1. With great apologies for its tardiness, I send the attached paper conveying my views on Soviet strategy toward the Greater Middle East and South Asian region. You may recall you met with Graham Fuller and me shortly after your return from Europe in May and asked for a survey of Soviet policy toward several of the region's "targets", including Pakistan, Baluchistan, Lebanon and Egypt. Some preliminary research and then the drafting of SNIE 11-9 (Soviet Policy Toward the US in 1984) delayed things.

2. This paper has benefited from inputs by Graham Fuller and discussions with a number of analysts. I also sought comments from several Agency components, the most important of which are attached at Tabs. Rather than compromise differences, I thought a think piece of this sort would be more stimulating on its own, side by side with the objections it has drawn. After considering those objections, I'll stand by my paper.

Fritz W. Ermarth
Fritz W. Ermarth

Attachments: As stated

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SOVIET STRATEGIES IN THE "SOUTHERN THEATER"

The future of the Soviet Union as a superpower, the East-West power balance, and the chance of a major US-Soviet conflict in the next two decades are likely to be determined, more than anywhere else, in the region south of Soviet borders stretching from India to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Does the USSR have a coherent strategy in this theater? There is no question that the men in the Kremlin today, as did their predecessors, have keen ambitions to dominate this region. It presents them with compelling vulnerabilities as well as obstacles; they are clearly active or trying to be active throughout it. Their strategy in the region is in some ways analogous to their military doctrine. Pressing on a broad front, they seek to "break through" on key "axes of advance" which can be turned to decisive advantage throughout the theater. Simultaneously applying several operational tools, they are tactically opportunistic and will try to reinforce success as it comes.

The Strategic Importance of the Southern Theater.

This region is potentially the key to overturning the East-West geopolitical balance that has emerged since 1945. Its strategic importance to the USSR is vastly understated by defining it as access to warm water ports. The single most important element in the region is its oil, which promises to be vital to the health of West European and Japanese societies, as well as to many LDCs, for the rest of this century and beyond. The region is also the heart of the Islamic world, potentially able to exert a cultural and spiritual influence which, like European civilization, may come to undermine essential parts of the Soviet system at home if the Soviets do not eventually control it.

The geography of the region is itself of strategic importance. Soviet dominance of all or additional parts of it would greatly ease the ability of the USSR to project power in Africa and Southeast Asia. No doubt Soviet controlled port facilities on the Arabian Sea, especially if linked by secure land routes to Soviet territory would be of great military value. By the time the Soviets were able to create such facilities, however, the political effects of the process would have long since revolutionized the whole environment.

The Southern Theater is by far the most important major region of the Third World to the Soviets, rivaling the strategic status of East Asia and even Europe in some ways. This is because its dominance, or the high likelihood of its dominance, by the USSR would help extend Soviet influence in the other Eurasian regions.

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Despite several decades of persistent effort, the Soviets have not expanded their influence in the Southern Theater steadily or with ease. Barriers of culture, countervailing Western and local power, tactical clumsiness on the Soviet part, and the sheer unpredictability of the region have all posed obstacles.

Nevertheless, several "megatrends" in the region on balance favor the long-term expansion of Soviet influence. Political volatility within and among the region's states continues to afford penetration opportunities.

The Soviet military buildup has made the USSR the strongest military actor in the region, greatly outweighing with its regional forces on Soviet territory any combination of quickly available local and Western forces and also undermining the ability of the US to offer credible strategic guarantees. A key task for Soviet regional strategy is to turn this military preponderance "in being" into an effective geopolitical lever at acceptable risk. As elsewhere, the USSR has lacked the political, economic, and cultural appeal that could ease this task.

The political and economic development of the Islamic countries of the region could strengthen over time the obstacles to lasting Soviet penetration. But development is equally likely to produce social turmoil that encourages it. Soviet military forces are not capable of simply walking over the regions to the south; its distances and terrain are more difficult than Europe. The US may try to put in place forward military capability to deter Soviet power projection, such as bases and small deployments. Yet theater equivalence between Soviet military power and that of the West and its partners is even less likely in Southwest Asia than in Europe.

Among the "megatrends" which could eventually attenuate the pressure of Soviet power on the Southern Theater, perhaps the most important in the long run is the development of the Soviet system itself. Before the region witnesses a decisive expansion of Soviet power, it is possible that stresses within Soviet society combined with Soviet failures in international affairs could lead to a turning inward of Soviet policy which reduces the challenge. This is an exceedingly long shot prospect. It cannot be taken for granted. It depends on sustained and coherent resistance to Soviet power by the US, by its allies, and by local states. It will depend crucially on the outcome of the war in Afghanistan.

Soviet strategy in the Southern Theater can best be addressed in terms of Soviet policy toward several sub-regional problems or relationships, each of which links to others, often in contradictory ways. The one which weighs most heavily on the Soviet leadership today is the war in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

As of today, the USSR aims to win the war. Its strategy is to keep at bay and grind down the resistance, to isolate it from the mass of the population or drive larger numbers out of the country, and to slowly build

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up a civil-military infrastructure through training, indoctrination, and cooption. We do not know how long the Soviets believe this strategy will take. Its composition suggests a 5-10 year time horizon.

In the meantime, although the Soviets may believe that vast national power and proximity guarantee their ultimate success, they cannot point to impressive progress on the ground. On the contrary, numerous reports suggest a mood of mounting anxiety and frustration about the war in the Soviet leadership, especially within the Soviet military leadership. They have the physical strength, but they may doubt that they have the time and political staying power to make their protracted strategy victorious. The low morale of Soviet troops clearly has adverse operational consequences; and we see more evidence of Soviet popular and elite discontent about the war than in past years.

If the Soviets do win in Afghanistan, or are seen to be on the road to ultimate victory at costs they can easily bear, the political and strategic impact on the region will be considerable. The countries of the region will increasingly be persuaded that Soviet power must be accommodated; and the Soviets will gradually assemble new assets for intruding upon the region, such as military bases and points of local political-economic contact. It is unlikely that a gradual Soviet victory will itself galvanize regional resistance since the drama of the original invasion did not do so.

To the extent the Soviets face a "no-win" situation, however, there are two possibilities. They may be persuaded to escalate their military campaign and forces inside Afghanistan and also to increase significantly their pressure on Pakistan. Evidence of Soviet frustration in Afghanistan, reporting of Soviet pressures on Pakistan, and evidence of Soviet efforts to stimulate Indian initiatives against Pakistan all raise the near-term probability of this development to a very dangerous level.

If neither patience nor escalation get the Soviets out of a "no-win" predicament in Afghanistan, the longer term implications could be in the opposite direction. Prosecution of the war could increasingly distract the Soviet leadership from other initiatives in the region, as it seems to have in recent years. And, most important, popular -- and especially professional military -- displeasure with the war could join other internal problems to pose more serious challenges to the regime's policy priorities and, ultimately, to its stability.

Because Soviet power is so heavily engaged, the war in Afghanistan is today the keystone of future Soviet power in the region. Failing some dramatic and easily exploited new opportunity elsewhere, such as a pro-Soviet regime emerging "naturally" in Iran following Khomeini, the Soviets must win, rapidly or slowly, but steadily, in Afghanistan to progress elsewhere. Alternatively, unless a phalanx of strong US-supported states, including Iran, arises to oppose them, the Soviets must lose in Afghanistan if the long-term expansion of their power in the region is to be prevented. The outcome is still in question.

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India and Pakistan

Size and prominence in the Third World give India an importance to Soviet foreign policy quite apart from regional considerations. Although to a much lesser extent, Pakistan is also important in its own right to Moscow. India is the model of a real alliance relationship between the USSR and a major noncommunist (some Soviet documents say capitalist) Third World country.

India has long been a part of Soviet strategy for the containment of China. Now India is increasingly a part of Soviet strategy toward Southwest Asia because of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war.

The Soviets can never be completely at ease about their relationship with India, Afghanistan implications aside. Indian domestic politics are not controllable or easily influenced by the Soviets. India could well intensify its efforts to improve relations with China. It can always turn more to Western sources for high quality military systems. India's tolerance toward the Soviet position in Afghanistan is grounded primarily in its aims to dominate Pakistan, its anti-US attitudes, and its need for the Soviet alliance. But India does not give unequivocal applause to Soviet expansionism in South Asia.

The critical question here is whether the Soviets can make India party to a decisive squeeze play against Pakistan which substantially alters the geopolitics of the region and gives the Soviets the possibility of winning the Afghan war quickly by cutting off the resistance and thoroughly discrediting the US as a regional ally. The Soviets very much want Pakistan's support of the Mujahedin to be stopped. They appreciate that saber rattling and an occasional bombing of a border village will not change Zia's policy. Direct Soviet military threats on the border are most likely to bring in additional US support and conceivably US military presence. Getting Pakistan out of the Afghan war equation requires internal destabilization or an Indo-Pakistan war or both to bring down Zia, change his policies, or, in the extreme, dismember Pakistan.

India would rather dominate than dismember Pakistan. It is not so clear that India would rather tolerate an independent Pakistan than see it dismembered. The Soviets would prefer a unified but friendly Pakistan, and would tolerate Indian domination if that is required to achieve the desired result. There is limited but convincing evidence that the Soviets would prefer Pakistan's dismemberment to a hostile, unified Pakistan allied with the US, even though the latter serves Soviet-Indian ties.

Could Soviet need to win the Afghan war quickly and Indian desires to dominate Pakistan, and specifically to terminate the Pak nuclear program, lead to concerted Indo-Soviet action? The current trend of events raises this probability. In any event, the Soviets would surely prefer to persuade India to attack Pakistan in some way than to do so themselves because of the

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political difficulties posed for Washington by Indian initiative. At this moment, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that the Soviets will take action against Pakistan entirely on their own, even though this would be easier for Washington to react to.

The Baluchistan Option

Baluchistan is frequently cited as some kind of key to Soviet strategy in the region -- which it probably is not. It is, however, an example of one facet of Soviet strategy in the "great game" of playing on tribal rivalries within primitive states of the area, a subject which deserves a lot more attention than it normally gets. The Soviets have long cultivated ties to political and regional groups in Pakistan that might be mobilized to overthrow the regime or dismember the state. Afghanistan gives them both a motive and a place from which to operate. Baluchistan is one target of Soviet attention.

Amidst much uncertainty as to what the facts are, there is controversy about the significance of Soviet interest in Baluchistan. The inflated claims of some that it is the USSR's final stepping stone to the Indian Ocean are often countered by an less founded insistence that "there is no evidence" of a Soviet penetration effort. A clearly incomplete body of evidence supports the following:

- Since well before the Afghan war the Soviets have sought influence with all manner of Baluch, from traditional tribal leaders at home and in exile to radical urbanized students. These efforts have included supplying arms and military training for separatist elements.
- Some Baluch elements have reportedly been useful in interfering with Afghan Mujahedin operations and supplies. The extent of this help to the Soviets is probably very limited, however. Most Baluch elements appear to have a very healthy suspicion of Soviet activities, and they tend to be regarded by Afghan resistance as allies.
- Soviet ability to exploit Baluch separatism has probably been reduced by Zia's more tolerant policies since 1977. But the Baluch factor could become significant again if Pakistan goes unstable for other reasons.
- The slow outmigration, urbanization, and economic development of Baluchistan's people probably increases, rather than decreases, Soviet potential for troublemaking at Pakistan's expense.

More generally, Soviet interest in Baluch separatism should not be viewed as a fifth column ready at some point swiftly to open the road to the Indian Ocean coast. It reflects rather, and in a particularly strategic place, a Soviet tactic of buying into the separatist forces which could abet the destabilization of two vital barrier states of the region, Pakistan and Iran. Other cases of comparable interest are the Azeris and the Kurds.

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Against both Pakistan and Iran the Soviets simultaneously seek a) to exert influence on the central government; b) to cultivate potential alternatives to the central government, e.g., oppositions; and c) to penetrate and stimulate separatist movements.

Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf

Iran and the Gulf are the prizes of the region. The Soviets have long believed that they should, by right of proximity and historically "objective trends", exert a dominant influence over the area's security affairs and its resources. The withdrawal of British influence, the fall of the Shah, and the difficulties the US faces in positioning countervailing power should, the Soviets believe, give them opportunities to advance their long-standing interest. But their advances have not been commensurate with the apparent opportunities. They are wrestling with how to shape a more effective strategy for this critical part of the theater.

Khomeini's Iran has not afforded the Soviets great opportunities to advance at the government level. Yet the Soviets do maintain diplomatic and varied economic ties to Iran. Twenty percent of Iranian imports come via Soviet territory and Soviet allies/clients are an important source of Iran's arms. Tehran does not treat the "second (Soviet) devil" with quite the disdain and hostility reserved for the "first (US) devil." Moreover, in recent weeks Tehran, after some internal dispute, actively sought to plead its case on the Gulf war with the Soviets at a high level; hence the Gromyko-Sadr talks. We don't believe either side achieved much, but we can conclude a) the diplomatic relationship is not without some promise, b) there are elements in Khomeini's regime likely to survive him who are ready to treat with the Soviets, and, therefore, c) the Soviets tactic of playing both sides still works to some extent, despite the pronounced tilt to Iraq. We have recent reporting to the effect that the Soviets now regard the Iran-Iraq war as tending to play into their hands because the security problems it has engendered encourage Iran and other Gulf states to seek Soviet favor, including Soviet arms, permitting the Soviets to penetrate politically without jettisoning their tie to Iraq.

The decimation of the Tudeh and the leftist Mujahedin in Iran have sharply reduced Soviet prospects for developing a congenial alternative to the Khomeini regime at the center. But it's very hard to tell what Soviet influence assets are still available. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Moreover, as indicated above, some Iranian leaders today are more willing to entertain ties to Moscow than is Khomeini.

There is ample evidence that, over the years, the Soviets have sought to penetrate and, occasionally, support potential separatist groups in Iran, notably the Azeris of "southern Azerbaïdzhân", probably the Khuzistan Arabs, the Kurds, and the Baluch. We have enough evidence to detect activity, not enough to establish the magnitude or strategic direction of Soviet involvement. Up to now, it is probable that Soviet investments have

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represented a fairly routine hedge for the future. Soviet priorities have been on those ruling at the center and on the central opposition in Iran. There is some evidence to suggest that the Soviets may increase their attention to the minorities, especially in Azerbaidzhan. We don't yet see a shift of Soviet strategy toward exploiting the minorities to destabilize the country. But this is a possibility. Present and expected gaps in our intelligence make it likely our detection of such a shift will be tardy and uncertain. And there is strong resistance on the part of many analysts to the idea that the Soviets would follow a destabilization strategy toward Iran or any other major state of the region.

Although it still offers them strategic opportunities, the Iran-Iraq war has been a net negative for the Soviets so far. They have tried, but not yet succeeded in parlaying their relations with both sides into a major advance in Iran or the region as a whole, and they still fear that the US will exploit the war to establish a permanent military presence in the Gulf area. As suggested above, however, the Soviets may be getting more optimistic about their prospects.

The Soviets would surely like to preside over a settlement of the conflict along the lines of their mediating role between India and Pakistan at Tashkent in 1965. The basic political requirement for such a role has been absent, namely, a shared interest between the belligerents in compromise. That interest could possibly arise fairly suddenly, however. Khomeini's death could lead to a reduction of Tehran's demands. The Soviets might be willing to promote the removal of Saddam Huseyn if they can identify a successor regime in which they have confidence.

While probably not committed for all time to Saddam Huseyn, the Soviets do not want to jeopardize their Iraqi connection seriously for uncertain gains with Iran. Iraq is their one substantial entree into the affairs of the Gulf now, and it usefully diversifies their engagement on the Arab side of the conflict with Israel, notwithstanding Iraqi-Syrian tensions.

In the rest of the Gulf and with the Saudis, the current Soviet formula is very quiet diplomacy -- which is all they can get away with. Basically, they are trading on Gulf awareness that, sooner or later, the Soviet Union is going to be a bigger factor in the area which must be taken into account. Meanwhile, the most discreet reception to Soviet approaches gives the Gulf states some leverage with Washington. This formula is unlikely to carry the Soviets very far beyond their current relations with Kuwait, however, barring some other change in the politics of the area, e.g., some development which dramatically discredits the protective role of the US (e.g., our leaving Pakistan in the lurch), and builds the image of the USSR as very powerful but sufficiently benign to work with.

What, then, will be Soviet strategy toward this sub-region? The odds seem to favor continuation of present policies because they are not without promise and the present Soviet leadership appears disinclined to try major policy departures in the face of risk and uncertainty. At the same time, we see a significant increase in Soviet political activity recently. They are clearly working harder on the opportunities they think they have.

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A significant shift of Soviet strategy cannot be ruled out. One possibility would be substantially increased aid to Iraq coupled with severe pressure on Iran, including military pressure in the north, to force a new consensus in Tehran for ending the war under Soviet sponsorship. Success at this surely risky venture could leave the USSR the dominant superpower protector of the Gulf. Failure could bring in the US and lead to much deeper Soviet-Iranian hostility. On balance, it seems unlikely that the Soviets would use this approach unless the Iranians look like they are enjoying dramatic military successes against Iraq -- an unlikely prospect according to most analysis.

Another option would be a longer-term Soviet shift toward reliance on minorities to promote destabilization and fragmentation of a post-Khomeini Iran. This course might seem less risky in the short term because it could be explored gradually. But if it begins to prove successful, the risks start rising sharply. Iran might at some point begin to fall apart; but it won't happen quickly and cleanly. The Soviets would have to threaten intervention on behalf of their favored minority, the Azeris probably. The worst outcome would be a still unified Iran, nudged closer to the US by Soviet actions.

Recitation of these uncertainties and risks should not be taken to mean that, after all, the Soviets have no prospects around the Gulf. The "megatrends" of superior military power, deep strategic interest, and local instability continue to favor them. And the outcome in Afghanistan (and closely related Pakistan), so critical to everything else, is still up for grabs.

Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan

Israel's attack on Lebanon and defeat of Syria's forces inflicted a major setback to the Soviets. But they have recovered through persistence in rearming the Syrians and US inability to sponsor a settlement in Lebanon.

The visits of Politburo member Gaydar Aliyev to Syria and Central Committee expert Karen Brutents to Lebanon and Syria earlier this year suggested that the Soviets might be reconnoitering for new diplomatic initiatives in the area. After the US pullout from Beirut, the opportunity seemed inviting. Until very recently the Soviets have been in somewhat of a waiting posture, rather like the US at present. They have acted to protect their position in Syria against the vagaries of political intrigue in Damascus, particularly Rifat Asad's unreliability. They appear to be leaving Lebanon largely to the Syrians, but the impending Polyakov visit and other signs indicated that they want to play a hand of their own there as well. They are making sustained, but low key, efforts to restore some degree of cohesion to the PLO; here too they have left the initiative to the Syrians and noticeably distanced themselves from Yasir Arafat.

Moscow is clearly pressing for movement in relations with Jordan, exploiting King Husseyn's need for arms and his desire to pressure Washington with a live Soviet option. A tie to Jordan is always of value to

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the Soviets because it diversifies the Soviet position in the Arab-Israeli confrontation and could open doors to the conservative states of the Peninsula.

It is not apparent at present that the Soviets have a longer-term political strategy for this portion of the region other than sticking with clients they have, cultivating new relationships where possible, and waiting to see what happens. Something new is bound to happen before long, however, and the Soviets are positioning themselves to act on new opportunities.

The formation of a new government in Israel may be the next break point for Soviet policy in the Arab-Israeli nexus. Should a coalition government in Israel start casting about for new paths of compromise, the resulting fluidity may give the Soviets new diplomatic opportunities, even the prospect of relations with Israel. Although there is not much novelty in it, the latest Soviet proposal for "comprehensive peace" in the region represents, at a minimum, a marker for a Soviet role in the near future, and an effort to appeal to Arab moderates frustrated by the inability of the US to get any movement. If prospects for movement on Arab-Israeli issues do reappear, however, the main Soviet problem will stem from the US resuming a much more active role on the basis of its superior political position as Israel's guarantor and the security partner of many Arab states. The Soviet Union can only deliver arms; the US just might be able to deliver Israeli concessions. Should a revival of the peace process take place, the Soviets may concentrate, as in the past, on backing the most radical Arab demands and even pushing events toward another confrontation.

The problem for Soviet diplomacy in the Arab-Israeli context, as elsewhere in the region, is that the USSR's great military muscle "over the horizon" to the north and its local instruments of subversion and intrigue are not easy to use constructively, to build political order among and within nations who have autonomous political vitality. To exploit its military power effectively for political ends in a region constantly beset by war, the Soviets must credibly threaten to use direct force. This is risky. In countries with a very unformed internal environment, the Soviets try to build a disciplined Marxist-Leninist core on which to rely. But most nations of Islam resist this. Short of direct military intervention, the Soviets must exploit arms supply and the myopic tenacity of local conflict to insinuate their influence. When the region's governments begin to think seriously about ways out of their age-old conflicts, the US tends in the end to be the more congenial partner. Should policy blunders or strategic retreat from the region reduce US leverage, or renewed confrontation magnify the relative disparity of US and Soviet military capabilities in more extreme scenarios, then the Soviets will have new prospects to advance.

Egypt

Egypt deserves special treatment, apart from the Arab-Israeli context, not only because it assumed at Camp David a special stance toward that conflict, but because, unlike the other Arab states, Egypt is a nation. It has a national heritage and future more cohesive and substantial than any other Arab country.

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The Soviets would certainly like to return to a position of influence in Cairo. They sought the recent exchange of ambassadors toward that end. But they probably have no illusions that this step alone puts the relationship even tentatively on a course back to the status they enjoyed under Nassar. No doubt they expect that an improved diplomatic relationship with Egypt will enhance their bargaining leverage throughout the region, although perhaps not as much as it will enhance Cairo's leverage in Washington and Jerusalem. They probably also expect that it will give them increased access to Egypt's internal politics, which are sure to face turbulent times.

A return to the past Egyptian dependency on Moscow for arms is highly unlikely given the US supplier role that has developed in the last decade. Nevertheless, the cost and political uncertainty of relying on the US for arms may encourage the Egyptians to turn again in a limited way to the USSR for less sophisticated weapons.

The Soviets probably look to a limited arms supply relationship, increased diplomatic influence, and the possibility of internal discontinuities in Egyptian political and economic development to provide them new opportunities downstream. In any case, the location, size, and long-term political gravity of Egypt in the Arab world makes the investment worthwhile.

The Yemens and the Horn of Africa

The Soviet positions in Ethiopia and the PDRY, to a lesser extent also in North Yemen, offer the potential of backdoor access to the Middle East. They offer physical advantages in terms of basing for military, paramilitary, and various covert activities against neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Sudan. They also present to the governments of the region an image of encircling Soviet power which, if it cannot be contained reliably, must be accommodated.

Soviet policy toward Ethiopia is at present aimed primarily at consolidation and stabilization of the Soviet position. The Mengistu regime is beset by serious insurgencies and severe economic problems. At the same time, it is not eager to build a strong Marxist-Leninist party apparatus. Moscow has long been lobbying for because it could eventually challenge the power of Mengistu's military junta and give the Soviets a more viable base of support inside the country without him. In short, making sure that the Soviet position in Ethiopia is not reversed gets more Soviet attention now than efforts to exploit that position regionally. Nevertheless, the Soviets continue to develop and use the military base access they have in the country.

We have evidence that more pro-Soviet figures have advanced their power in the PDRY recently. This may give the Soviets new tactical options. Some fear that the Soviets may step up their subversive activity against Oman and Saudi Arabia from the Yemens. But there is no strong evidence on this as yet. Since these outposts of Soviet influence are more means than ends in themselves, future Soviet policy toward them probably turns on developments

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in the vital sub-regions of the Gulf, the Arab-Israeli neighborhood, and Afghanistan.

Turkey

Geography and culture make Turkey an important target of Soviet policy toward the Southern Theater. Historic animosities and its membership in NATO obstruct Soviet influence. Turkey's sense of vulnerability, the Ottoman political tradition of evading confrontational relationships where possible, and the enduring potential for internal instability give the Soviets recurrent prospects.

The military significance of Turkey to Soviet strategic planning is enormous. It controls Soviet maritime access to the Mediterranean, notwithstanding the permissive conditions of the Montreaux Convention. It lies astride the most direct air routes into the Middle East. Depending on the fulfillment of plans for its air and land force modernization, it is potentially one of the most formidable military powers in NATO. And it is a potential base from which US military power can act to interfere with Soviet operations toward the Gulf region. Whether Turkey would permit US access to its bases during a Gulf or Iranian contingency involving the Soviets is uncertain. That very uncertainty must weigh heavily in Soviet strategic calculations, however. If Turkey could somehow be dislodged from NATO the potential for Soviet military access to the region would be vastly improved and the political impact would be revolutionary.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Soviets pursued a policy of diplomatic and economic detente toward Ankara. In the 1970s the Soviets activated the "second path" of destabilization through wholesale and indiscriminate terrorism. While some find the evidence inconclusive, the role of Bulgaria as source of arms for sustained domestic violence in Turkey makes Soviet complicity apparent.

Because the organizational base of terrorism in Turkey was so anarchic, the military which seized power in 1980 was able to quell it very effectively. Whether the Soviets might at some time in the future be able to reopen this path to destabilizing Turkey depends a great deal on the political and economic effectiveness of the present Turkish regime. Given the picture only five years ago, the present outlook for Turkish stability and development is promising, but not conclusive.

Meanwhile, the Soviets have returned to the first path of seeking government-to-government detente, inhibited by their tilt toward Greece on Cyprus, their occasional badgering of Turkey about INF and other NATO initiatives, and, above all, the deep cloud of suspicion left by the era of mass terrorism. The present Turkish government is strongly committed to NATO and to the US tie. It enjoys wide public support for this stance. Yet, like other NATO members, Turkey has its own reasons for a more nuanced policy toward the USSR than the US might wish to see it pursue. US support for Turkish interests in Cyprus and for military modernization has been disappointing to Ankara. Turkish interests in the Middle East frequently oblige a certain distance from US policies. Underlying is Turkey's

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- persistent sense of exposure with insufficiently reliable backing. the Soviets can be expected to exploit any opportunity these circumstances might give them to increase their influence in Turkey.

Conclusion

The hallmarks of the Soviet posture toward the Southern Theater are:

Abiding ambitions to dominate the region for both offensive and defensive reasons.

The military potential for strategic dominance created by the buildup of Soviet regional and intercontinental forces over the past twenty years.

Multilayered tactical tools -- from arms supply to terrorism -- for exploiting the internal and interstate instabilities of the region.

Persistent and severe obstacles to the expansion of Soviet influence arising from the limits of Soviet political and cultural appeal, the risks of using military power, and the desire of the region's people to avoid domination by a real imperialist.

To the extent the Soviets can be said to have a region-wide strategy it is opportunistic and flexible: defend what you have, press where openings appear, and keep a variety of options simultaneously in play. Specific policies toward the major sub-regional issues addressed above will probably continue to dominate Soviet strategy toward the region as a whole.

How hard can the Soviets be expected to press in the years ahead? The foregoing discussion has tended to focus on Soviet policy problems and obstacles. Will they persist? Or will favorable "megatrends" of the regional power balance and local instability play into Soviet hands?

In retrospect, Soviet behavior during the early 1980s represents a kind of strategic underachievement. Given what appear to have been their opportunities after the fall of the Shah, they did not move very decisively or actively to exploit them, but appeared to adopt more of a defensive or holding posture. The obstacles already discussed account for this only in part. Other factors weighing on Kremlin decisionmaking also played a major role:

- The unexpectedly high cost of the Afghanistan commitment.
- The distracting effect of turmoil in Poland.
- The high degree of US commitment to the region after 1980.
- The onset of conditions within the top Soviet leadership conducive to risk avoidance and indecision.

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The total effect of these factors on Soviet policy may persist for several years, but is unlikely to last indefinitely. Even now Soviet diplomacy in the region is getting more active, and the results of a crisis over Pakistan -- especially whether it magnifies Soviet power or underscores US credibility as an ally -- will resonate powerfully throughout the region. Sooner or later and perhaps quite suddenly given the volatility of the region, the historic Soviet aim to dominate it is very likely to be pressed with increased determination and initiative. It is next to impossible that the countries of the region will, by themselves, become united and strong enough to pose an insurmountable obstacle to Soviet advances in the long run. Those advances are most likely to be thwarted if the next generation of Soviet leaders, now in the process of emerging, is persuaded that the "great game" in the Southern Theater is not worth the candle of cost and risk. What will persuade them is a combination of failure in Afghanistan, an unfavorable regional correlation of forces based on US commitment, and their own pressing internal priorities. Otherwise the next phase of the struggle over this strategic region is likely to be more lively and potentially more explosive than the recent past.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Fritz Ermath
NIO/USSR-EE

FROM: NESA/Persian Gulf Division

SUBJECT: Comments on Draft Paper "Soviet Strategies in
the 'Southern Theater'"

1. Persian Gulf analysts questioned in particular the discussion on page 12 and elsewhere about possible Soviet efforts to destabilize Iran by exploiting the country's minorities. They argue that:

- The Soviets might not find it in their interest to destabilize Iran, particularly given the uncertain outcome of such instability and the possibility that the country would fragment;
- The Soviets generally have tried to preserve stability in this area in the past;
- There is no recent reliable reporting of Soviet efforts to penetrate and support potential separatist groups in Iran;
- The Turkomans would not be worthy of Soviet interest since they constitute only a bite-sized minority found only along the border with the Soviet Union and in a few enclaves elsewhere;
- Western observers tend to overestimate the potential for separatism in Iran. The Azerbaydzhani were expected to provide an effective counter to Khomeini, and the Arabs of Khuzistan were expected to rally to Iraq's side at the outset of the war, but neither development occurred;
- Even if the Soviets do increase their attention to Iran's minorities, their ideological blinders will cause them to repeat past mistakes and there will be little, if any, payoff for Moscow.

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SUBJECT: Comments on Draft Paper "Soviet Strategies in the
'Southern Theater'"

2. Other random comments:

- On page 13, first full para, would add "trust in Moscow as a mediator" as one of basic political requirements in sentence two.
- On page 13, last para, second sentence, question use of word "awareness." Would fear or paranoia be a better one.
- On collection/analysis, one of our analysts notes that Soviet scholarship on the Kurds is outstanding. Another suggests that Soviet theoretical monographs on nationalities issues are tightly circumscribed by Marxist-Leninist dogma and would be of little use to us, but notes that the Soviets do produce good basic ethnographic studies.

18 July 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: NIO/USSR-EE
 FROM : [REDACTED] C/SOVA/TWAD
 SUBJECT : Memo on Soviet Strategies in the "Southern Theater"

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Fritz
 I found your essay on Soviet strategy in the "Southern Theater" misleading regarding Soviet actions and policies toward the Third World and Soviet regional opportunities vis-a-vis the United States. This rejoinder is intended to start a dialogue on several key issues that you address, particularly the strategic importance of the southern theater to the USSR.

Your essay appears to turn on the unconventional notion that the "future of the Soviet Union as a superpower" and "the East-West power balance" are "likely to be determined" in the southern frontier. Although I would argue that the chances for Soviet-American confrontation are greater in this region than anywhere else, the larger strategic issues that you raise will ultimately be settled in Europe or in Asia and will be determined by long-term trends in the strategic military and economic balance. The "most important developments" in the region for the Soviets are not oil and the ability of the Islamic world to "undermine essential parts of the Soviet system," but rather the proximity of the region to the USSR and the importance of the region to the West. The Soviet system is hardly as fragile as you suggest. Nor is Western-Japanese dependence on oil from the Middle East what it once was.

The so-called "megatrends" that you cite are particularly misleading.

- The Soviets have mixed feelings about "political volatility" and "social turmoil" in the region. Past experience has taught them that it presents threats as well as opportunities. Soviet caution in key Third World states and Moscow's setbacks in Egypt, Somalia, Guinea, Mali, Ghana, and the Sudan testify to this fact.
- The "military buildup" that you cite is overblown. The Soviets have moved more slowly on this frontier than any other; they have limited ability to project power beyond bordering areas; although they possess some military advantages vis-a-vis the West in a contest for Iran, they are at a serious disadvantage in South Asia, the Levant,

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and the Persian Gulf. The consequences of your observations for US policy in this regard are particularly questionable, exaggerating the limitations that do exist on Western capabilities.

- The success or failure of the USSR in Afghanistan ("the keystone of future Soviet power") will not determine Soviet success or failure in the region. Iran is clearly the more pivotal state.

Indeed, your discussion of Afghanistan is particularly worrisome to me. You make far too much of Soviet efforts to "win the war;" Moscow's interest is in controlling the situation, which it has succeeded in doing so far by establishing its own government in Kabul. You refer to mounting Soviet "anxiety and frustration" about the war as well as "popular and elite discontent;" the evidentiary base for these points is weak and even if you were correct these factors are not about to jeopardize Soviet policy in Afghanistan. In any event, most countries in the region are not accommodating to Soviet power; instead, they are trying to increase contacts with the United States.

Of course, the Soviets would like to see an end to Pakistani aid to the Mujahideen, but your essay exaggerates the possibility of and the extent of our knowledge of joint Soviet-Indian action against Zia, Soviet manipulation of Baluchistan ("a major target"), the Soviet "penetration effort" against Pakistan and the Soviet interest in separatism. (Baluchistan as an issue could vanish in the next ten years; there are already more Paks there than Baluchis.) Similarly, the Soviets would like to be in a stronger position in Iran, but your essay exaggerates so-called Soviet opportunities vis-a-vis the United States in Iran, likely Soviet penetration efforts among potential separatist groups, and Soviet opportunities in a post-Khomeini period. (I find your critical comments of our best source on these subjects, [redacted] particularly unfortunate. If there is a better source, then we would like to see him.) Finally, you suggest that the Soviets would promote the removal of Iraq's Saddam Husayn if they could identify a reliable successor; since the latter is impossible then the former is specious.

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I also agree that "something new is bound to happen before long" in the Middle East, but not on the basis of the factors you cite.

- The key to opening doors to conservative Arab states is not so much with Jordan but with Saudi Arabia, and the Soviets have made scant progress in their approaches to Riyadh.

- Although the Soviets have distanced themselves from Arafat, they have not abandoned him. They still see him as the best available head of the PLO and are trying to bring some cohesion to the PLO in spite of Syrian unwillingness to compromise.
- There is no evidence of serious Soviet diplomatic initiatives on Arab-Israeli issues and no basis for assuming Soviet backing of the most radical Arab demands if the peace process should be revived. More often than not the Soviets have tried to moderate certain radical demands in order to bring about a peace conference in which they would play a role.
- I understand neither the reference to Egypt as the "only" Arab nation nor the certainty of the assumption that Cairo will be facing "turbulent times". I believe that our time would be better spent trying to determine Moscow's options for getting back into the Middle East game without a strong position in Egypt.
- These options do not include, however, your own view of "backdoor access" to the Middle East via the Yemens and Ethiopia. In view of the strategic stakes that you identify in the region, it would appear that these states are tertiary to Soviet objectives.

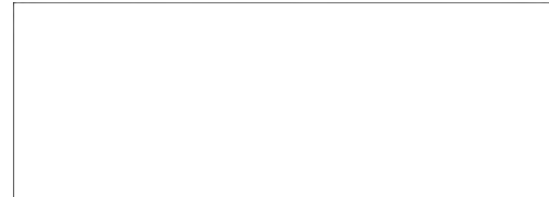
Finally, your discussion of Turkey bears little resemblance to political developments on Moscow's southern theater.

- The Ottoman political tradition of "evading confrontational relationships" would be applicable to internal enemies but not to such external enemies as the USSR.
- The conditions of the Montreaux Convention are not "permissive" but, in fact, define the choke point that the Soviets confront into the Mediterranean.
- The outcome of past such efforts suggests that Soviet efforts to destabilize Turkey would drive Ankara closer to NATO and not to the USSR.
- The reference to Soviet activation of "indiscriminate terrorism" in Turkey in the 1970s grossly distorts the evidence about a complex and controversial issue.

On balance, I do not agree that the USSR has established the "military potential for strategic dominance" in the region or the "multilayered tactical tools" to destabilize key regional actors. Moscow's lack of options to a US move to clear the Gulf with military power, if necessary, is a good example of the

USSR's regional military impotence. Nor do I believe that Moscow has failed to move "decisively or actively to exploit" numerous opportunities in the region or is compelled to do so given the "historic Soviet aim to dominate" the region. Your essay, in exaggerating these opportunities, Soviet advantages, and so-called favorable "megatrends," ignores Moscow's fundamental problems and disadvantages that have been accruing in the region since the USSR's expulsion from Egypt in 1972. Soviets have effectively been shut out of the Middle East since they "lost" Egypt, which is the only Arab country with real potential to challenge Israel. US policy has been exploiting these vulnerabilities with some success for the past ten years and it would be incorrect to suggest to US policymakers that the cost or effectiveness of such exploitation will become more difficult in the near term. Please let me know when you want to discuss some of these points.

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